Fads, Fantasies, and Fixes in Educational Management

Abstract
Theories and techniques abound as to how to effectively manage educational institutions. However, the preferred methods vary from year to year and decade to decade in a chaotic manner. These fads, fantasies, and fixes are usually little more than false panaceas or wishful thinking, and as such are destined to reap only sporadic gains and produce considerable frustration. The beneficiaries of the morass of confused management practices are consultants, or gurus, who often promise little more than their own preferred “answers” to desperate educational personnel. Alternatively, it is suggested in the present paper that the Law of Effect offers a proven way out of the managerial confusion. Problems with and potential solutions common to many educational management situations are offered.

There once was an Indian chicken farmer who lived on the outskirts of Bombay. For years, he scratched out a reasonable living from raising his chickens and selling both chickens and eggs.

One morning when he went to feed his flock, he noticed several dead chickens. Not knowing what to do, he packed his bags and made a long trek into the Himalayas, climbed a mountain, and found a guru. “Oh, guru!” he moaned, “I am a poor chicken farmer. The other morning, I discovered several dead chickens. What should I do?”

“What do you feed them?” asked the guru.

“Wheat, I feed them wheat.”

“That is your problem, my son. Corn! Feed them corn.”

The man paid his tribute to the guru, climbed down the mountain, and journeyed home. When he arrived, he immediately changed the chickens’ feed from wheat to corn. For three weeks, everything went fine. Then one morning, as he went to feed his flock, he found more dead chickens.

He packed his bags, made the trek to the Himalayas, and climbed the mountain once again. “Oh, guru!” he cried. “More of my chickens are dead!”

“How do you give them water?” asked the guru.

“I carved wooden bowls in which I gave them water.”

“Troughs! You need troughs!”

The farmer made the long journey home and built troughs. For six months, everything went along fine. Then one morning, as he went to feed his flock, he found more dead chickens. So, again, he made the trek to the guru. “Oh guru!” he cried. “More of my chickens are dead!”

“How do you house them?” asked the guru.

“I built a wooden shack in which they live.”

“Ventilation! They need more ventilation!”

Back home, the farmer spent a small fortune putting a new ventilation system in his coop. For a year, everything went well. Then, one morning, he went out to discover that all of his chickens were dead.

Beside himself with grief, he packed his bags and again made his way to the mountain. “Oh, guru!” he wailed. “All of my chickens are dead!”

“That’s a shame,” replied the guru. “I had a lot more solutions” (Tobin, 1992).

This story mirrors the search for effective management strategies by American educators. Educational organizations are frequently being given solutions that will make them more effective. Common sense generalizations and panacea-like prescriptions appear regularly in the popular educational management literature. Large numbers of professional
organizations, however, like the guru, are blindly throwing darts at the wall, hoping to hit the bull's-eye or even the target. Management experts and theorists spew practical advice that ostensibly makes sense. Motivated by increasing criticism from all quarters, many educators are so desperate to improve their operations or “save their chickens” that they are willing to try anything to make improvements, whether it can be expected to have a genuine effect or not. They often find themselves flooded with so many new approaches, and are too busy attempting to apply them to their working environment, they have no way of determining which strategies are effective and which are not.

Popular Management Approaches

Professor Joe Bailey of the University of Texas said that “...the half-life of all panaceas in the educational and business worlds is seven years, plus or minus two” (Bailey, 1971, p.48). In the 1990s the time frame has decreased to about three years (Daniels, 1994). As the impact of each fades, it is hard to produce the kind of changes expected and/or promised, many administrators drop the old and change to the currently “hot” management theory and the technique it generates or regales. All too often, educational institutions respond with spasmodic campaigns such as the following:

- Embarking on culture-transformation programs. The concepts and activities associated with typical attempts to change culture are not based on solid research and are not implemented in a way that demonstrates cause-and-effect relationships between what was done and what was achieved (Tichy & Devanna, 1986).
- Exhorting employees to strive for “excellence,” “innovation,” “intrapreneurial activities,” and “entrepreneurial risk taking” (Manz & Sims, 1990). Too often these approaches fail to adequately operationalize their terms creating tensions, jealousies, and motivational problems that far exceed potential benefits.
- Total Quality Management (TQM). TQM is a set of processes and procedures for enhancing performance in which everyone strives to continuously improve the path leading to success (Cornesky, 1993). For many organizations, these represent quick fixes and superficial responses which have become the trademark of educational improvement efforts.
- “Management by wandering around” popularized by Tom Peters (1982) in *In Search of Excellence*. This tactic involves observing firsthand what occurs in the classroom, auditorium, or seminar conference room. Mishandled it becomes management by “stumbling around.” Well-meaning but unknowing administrators can create morale problems among teachers and other employees by where they walk and where they don’t.
- A myriad of other approaches, techniques, systems, and methods such as site-based management, outcome-based management, transactional analysis, transformational leadership, self-directed work teams, empowering faculties, and cooperative learning fade from memory and take their places in the graveyard of departed management systems.

This cycle of temporary answers, instead of concrete and directed solutions, continues because most approaches to management are never rooted in anything more substantial than limited observations, in restricted settings, over minimal time periods.

Tom Peters’ classic book *In Search of Excellence* (Peters & Waterman, 1982) is a telling example of how people form (and follow) strong opinions and beliefs, especially ones that sound commonsensical but lack scientific basis. For example, three years after *In Search of Excellence* became world renowned, Business Week magazine revisited the so-called excellent companies highlighted in the book and found that 14 of the 43 (33%) no longer met Peters’ criteria for excellence. In fact, several of the organizations singled-out for their successful management practices experienced considerable losses and underwent major reorganization soon after the book was released. Ironically, even institutions touted as the “best of the best” and worthy of emulation were floundering. Yet, consider the impact *In Search of Excellence* has had, on American and worldwide management practices. Administrators around the world turn to this book to solve their management problems. In the education area, books like *Achieving Educational Excellence* (Astin, 1985) applied the principles illustrated in Peters’ book. Organizations spend untold millions of dollars modeling themselves after the “remarkably successful” institutions examined in the book.

Managing People

A critical supervisory skill for educational administrators is that of managing people and bringing out the best in them so that the organization can achieve superior results. This requires a clear and precise understanding of human behavior. Yet, most people understand the laws of human behavior at about the same level as they comprehend the laws of gravity. They know that gravity keeps them on the earth and they know not to walk off the top of a tall building. However, most do not know enough about gravity to send astronauts to the moon, or even that bullets dropped and fired parallel to a level surface will hit the ground simultaneously. Most managers understand human behavior well enough to realize that positive methods of management are preferred over negative ones. Unfortunately, they do not comprehend behavioral principles sufficiently to select,
deliver, and time workplace incentives and punishments so as to effectively influence worker behavior. This situation has given rise to numerous personality and motivation theories intended to help managers cope with the behavior of their employers, peers and subordinates. Some of these theories include: Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954), Herzberg’s two-factor theory of motivation (Herzberg, 1966), and McClelland’s need for power (1975). Such theories, however, often suffer shortcomings (King, 1970; Smither, 1994; Soper, Rosenthal, & Milford, in press). First, they are so abstract as to be meaningless in day-to-day affairs. In other words, they do not generate specific techniques for practice. Lecturing administrators on “self-actualization” leaves them with little real grasp of what they should actually do about a constantly complaining subordinate. Second, most theories describe ideal human behavior but give little information on how to achieve it. Few would disagree with the thought that “relationships of trust and respect” are goals to strive for; how to reach those goals with an overly suspicious subordinate is another matter. Third, managers are taught that if they want to understand why people do things, they must first understand motives, inner drives, and attitudes. Furthermore, managers must change other’s motives if they want them to behave differently. This places managers in the position of playing amateur psychologists—a position not necessarily favored by most supervisors. For these reasons the use of psychological theories as an aid in assisting educational administrators in managing their human resources has been disappointing.

A Practical Approach for Educational Managers

Fortunately, there is an approach which provides an alternative perspective for scientifically studying behavior. This body of knowledge is about 80 years old and is based on the premise that all behavior is primarily a function of its consequences. The embodiment of this method, behaviorism, is Thorndike’s classic Law of Effect. In Thorndike’s own words, the Law of Effect is simply stated thus:

Of several responses made to the same situation, those which are accompanied or closely followed by satisfaction (reinforcement)...will be more likely to recur; those which are accompanied or closely followed by discomfort (punishment)...will be less likely to occur” (Thorndike, 1911, p.244).

Most behavioral and management researchers and practitioners in education generally accept the validity of this law. It is both well understood scientifically and obvious in everyday life, on the job and off. The Law of Effect is grounded in social science theory and in reliable research results. It has been demonstrated time after time in highly controlled experiments and is directly observable in all walks of life.

Behavior can be changed in two ways—by what comes before it and by what comes after it. When one tries to influence behavior before it occurs, one is using antecedents. An antecedent is a person, place, thing, event or “situation,” as indicated in the Law of Effect above, coming before a behavior that encourages one to perform that behavior. Some of the more common antecedents used in education are such things as goals, objectives, priorities, accountabilities, policies, procedures, standards, meetings, and rules (Daniels, 1989). All of these are intended to communicate what is expected of individuals. While such prompts are constructive in starting behavior it is what comes after the behavior that maintains and supports performance. By looking, in a systematic way, at all the antecedents and consequences particularly consequences, associated with a given behavior or performance, we are usually able to gain a useful perspective on why people do what they do, and surmise ways to help people change.

In spite of the simplicity of the Law of Effect, one can utilize its implications to help educational administrators manage people in a wide variety of circumstances. Frequently, administrators are bewildered because their employees do not do what they are supposed to do. The fact that people perform as they do because of what happens to them after they do it, makes it easier to understand why people will increase the frequency of behavior if a positive consequence is given after each time they respond. Quite frankly, a behavior that results in a pleasant experience is more likely to be repeated. Likewise, behavior that results in an unpleasant or aversive experience is more likely not to be repeated.

Technically defined, behavioral consequences are those things that follow a behavior which change the probability of that behavior occurring in the future (Luthans, 1992). This definition allows scientists to study and predict behavior through careful observation. However, this concept is enormously useful to the nonscientist as well, especially if applied systematically. Because the impact of a particular consequence on the rate or frequency of a behavior can be observed and altered, managers and supervisors can learn how to influence any behavior; and the main job of managers and supervisors is to influence behavior.

The role of leaders in every organization is not to find fault, place blame, or avoid responsibilities, but to understand why people are behaving as they are and then modify consequences to promote specific, desired behaviors. Politicians, teachers, advertisers, parents, labor leaders, and managers all influence behavior in order to achieve their goals.

A word of caution: managerial-subordinate interactions are complex, as are all human interactions. Although the Law of Effect seems simple, the combination of multiple reinforcers and punishers in
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real-life, difficulty of identifying specific behavior and consequences, and the different levels of emotional involvement by managers in given situations may produce undesired or unpredictable results. If administrators are to use the Law of Effect productively, some nuances must be explained. These subtleties, discussed in greater detail by Daniels (1994), Fournier (1988), and Mager and Pipe (1984), are listed below and examined in the remainder of the paper. They involve understanding:

- that a consequence is positive or negative only as interpreted by the receiver of that consequence,
- that a manager’s or supervisor’s behavior is usually the most important factor influencing an employee’s behavior,
- the difference between antecedents and consequences and when to appropriately use each,
- employees’ behavior: when there are no positive consequences for performing,
- employees’ behavior: when they are rewarded for not performing,
- employees’ behavior: when they are punished for doing what they are supposed to do,
- employees’ behavior: when there is no negative consequence for poor performance.

Everyone’s Behavior Makes Sense to Them

Supervisors will go a long way in effectively influencing behavior of their employees if they understand that every person’s behavior makes sense to them. That is because everyone is reinforced in different ways. Initially, what is reinforcing to one person may not be obvious, but if one looks a little deeper, one can discover the consequences that maintain almost any behavior. A sense of empathy is critical here. A supervisor must continually be aware that a consequence is positive or negative only as interpreted by the receiver of that consequence. Supervisors must be willing to figuratively go around the desk and see the situation from the viewpoint of their employees. They must be able to walk in the employees’ shoes and see circumstances through others’ eyes. Failure to grasp employees’ perspectives result in an ongoing series of misinterpretations and misunderstandings often followed by deterioration of the relationship and performance.

Take an example with which we are all familiar. You have probably witnessed a situation where a child was misbehaving on purpose, with the result that the child received some kind of physical punishment or reprimand. Afterwards, you or the other adults involved might have wondered why a child would appear to want to be punished. Meanwhile, the child may have walked away rubbing the spanked area, but thinking, ‘They still love me.’ Remember that a consequence is positive or negative only as perceived by the receiver of that consequence. If love and attention are a positive consequence to a child and there is not much of that happening, then any attention, even an admonishment, may be seen as a positive consequence by that child. Attention is a powerful reinforcer even if it is chastisement. Failure to entertain the possibility that the child may be interpreting the administration of the aversive stimulus as a positive consequence will certainly lead to further difficulties.

The Importance of Managerial Behavior

The most important factor influencing an individual’s on-the-job behavior is usually their manager’s behavior. Most people at the managerial level are deeply concerned with those things that will please or anger their immediate superior, and their behavior reflects this concern. For example, most department chairpersons are intent on pleasing their immediate superior, the dean. To change in one way or another the behavior of all the chairpersons, one merely has to bring in a new dean. Candid employees might even admit that they act quite differently working for the new dean than they did for the predecessor.

Yet most people—and, particularly, most managers—seldom recognize the dramatic impact of their own behavior on that of their subordinates. The same chairpersons who admit they are different under the new dean will still minimize, and indeed, scoff at the impact they have on people below them. We are often more readily aware of the influence other people have on us than we are of the influence we have on other people.

The Difference Between Antecedents and Consequences

Most supervisors in educational organizations attempt to manage performance by telling people what to do. They tell them to work harder, to work smarter, to work better. Supervisors send memos, write policies and procedures, have meetings, develop goals and action plans, as well as establish deadlines, targets, standards, and budgets. They conduct training programs and hold classes, give monologues and have dialogues and sometimes impart words of wisdom in eloquent, inspiring speeches while often delivering impassioned pleas for increased effectiveness and efficiency.

Yet people frequently do not do what they are told, otherwise they would not smoke, drink alcohol excessively, or use drugs. Even though managers know that workers do not do what they are told, they run organizations as though performance problems can be solved by finding more and better ways of telling employees what to do.

Telling people what to do, however, is an antecedent. As we have seen, antecedents set the stage for behavior to occur. Even though antecedents happen
before behavior, they do not cause behavior to continue. Antecedents have limited control over actions. The role of an antecedent is to get a behavior to occur once or, at best, a few times. Effective antecedents are necessary to initiate performance, but are not sufficient to sustain performance.

Consequences, on the other hand, follow behavior and alter the probability that behavior will recur. That is, consequences cause behavior to occur more or less often in the future. Consequences include such things as verbal praise for doing a good job, a monetary bonus for outstanding performance, smiles and pats on the back for excellent work, feedback about performance, jelly beans, hugs and kisses, and gold stars. A reprimand for coming in late for work, a demotion for poor accomplishments, and taking back gold stars for disruptive behavior are also consequences. Even doing nothing is doing something! Ignoring someone’s behavior is probably the most common example of doing nothing. Management changes behavior by its inaction as well as its action.

Success in education as in other types of organizations, is dependent on lasting, consistent performance. Yet, much activity is heavily invested in antecedents such as memos, training, policies, mission statements, posters, buttons, and slogans. As the old saying goes: “After all is said and done, more is said than done.” Since antecedents only initiate behavior, it’s apparent why educational organizations must continually repeat their messages. What is needed is an increased emphasis on appropriate consequences for suitable performance as indicated by the Law of Effect.

The following four scenarios illustrate what happens when educational managers do not use appropriate consequences or use them incorrectly, thus causing themselves to lament why their employees don’t do as they’re supposed to do.

**COMMON MANAGERIAL PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS**

**Lack of Positive Consequences for Performing**

In this situation the performer does something and nothing happens. Eventually, the individual stops performing. This process is technically termed extinction. The behavior of interest is said to extinguish. Most managers feel that doing nothing has no effect on performance. The fact is that when managers do nothing following employee performance, they change that performance by decreasing the probability of its reoccurrence. From the perspective of the Law of Effect, doing nothing after performance decreases the probability of that response. Doing nothing does something.

Consider the following examples. From the performer’s point of view, will the indicated behavior be likely to continue?

- “I worked late last night to finish a report, but when I gave it to my boss this morning, she didn’t even look up from her desk.”
- “Six months ago I gave my supervisor a suggestion for improving the processes, and I haven’t heard anything from him since.”
- “My manager told me that bringing up unrelated material at staff meetings was making the meetings excessively long, so I stopped doing that, but he said nothing to me afterward.”
- “When I told my boss that we were going to complete the project on schedule, she said, ‘You don’t get medals for doing what you are paid to do.’”
- “Since my boss warned me about shortages, I make a special effort so my cash drawer balances each day, but my boss never says anything to me about it.”
- “You work your tail off around here and no one really seems to care.”

Obviously, an absence of positive consequences or rewards appears to exist to the performer in each of the above instances. But many managers feel getting paid is the reward.

Unfortunately, the weekly or semi-monthly paycheck does not qualify as a reward that influences people’s performance. The psychologist B.F. Skinner, once observed, “People don’t come to work to get paid, they come to work so the pay doesn’t stop” (cited in Fournier, 1988, p.33). Another example occurs when people put money in a vending machine and nothing falls into the tray. Some people try it again, but if the item fails to be delivered a second time, they will stop using that machine. Few people continue to put money in the machine over and over when nothing is delivered in return.

A frequent problem in many workplaces is that productive behavior is ignored. People who work the hardest and do the best are ignored because supervisors are spending their time and energy dealing with problem performers. Over a period of time, performance falls to a level necessary only to avoid punishment. The failure to reinforce productive behaviors is a common consequence in education, creating many performance problems.

Positive consequences or reinforcers should be delivered frequently. Reinforcers can be separated into two categories: tangible and social. Tangible reinforcers are objects or materials such as meals, jelly beans, a trophy, gift certificates, and money. Social reinforcers include a pat on the back, a verbal compliment, expression of appreciation, or even a smile.
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Examples are:

- "I noticed you put in some extra time last night to complete this report on time; I really appreciate your effort."
- "Thank you for limiting your discussion to the agenda material in today's staff meeting like I asked you to. Your cooperation helped the meeting go faster."
- "You take so much effort to make your work accurate, I thought you should have the first new computer."
- "You work hard and succeed at meeting our deadlines, I would like to buy you lunch today."

Rewards for Not Performing

Employees may not be doing expected behaviors because nonperformance is rewarding. Many managers reinforce nonperformance unconsciously on a regular basis. Examples are:

- Employees who do difficult tasks poorly are given only easy tasks to perform.
- Employees who are difficult to control receive job assignments giving them a lot of freedom.
- Employees who repeatedly complain to the boss about certain work assignments are given those work assignments less frequently.
- Employees who perform poorly receive a lot of attention from the boss who plays amateur psychologist and buys them coffee or lunch.
- When employees make errors, the boss corrects the errors.
- When a department manager frequently recommends a bad employee for promotion, rather than a good employee, because the manager cannot run the department without the good performer.
- When faculty members teach poorly, they become administrators.
- If a teacher's complaining is repeatedly rewarded with attention, the problem behavior will probably increase and other job-related activities such as teaching may decrease.
- The employee who has a problem with an assignment goes to his supervisor, asks for help, and leaves the problem on the supervisor's desk for him to resolve.
- The manager who has bad performers gives them a raise to motivate them to perform better.

To correct this problem make it pay off to perform as desired. People respond to consequences whether they are aware of them or not. Do not reward employees for nonperformance. Stop buying coffee and lunch for substandard performers. Do not play amateur psychologist; keep discussions relative to performance. When employees make errors, require them to correct their errors. Assist as necessary, but do not correct the errors yourself. When employees complain repeatedly about the work assignment that is assigned fairly and is unavoidable, ignore the complaints. Give verbal rewards, however, when the work assignment is performed correctly. Be wary of reverse delegation. You are there to assist your employees but make sure that you and the employee understand that it is still their problem to solve, opportunity to handle, or responsibility to deal with.

Punishment for Doing What is Expected

Research on the Law of Effect shows that people tend to behave less frequently when the behavior is followed by punishment. The most common reason people do not do as they are expected is simply that the desired "doing" is punishing. The following examples are appropriate performances followed by punishment:

- The employee who does difficult work well is assigned all of the difficult work.
- The employee who makes suggestions at meetings gets to do extra projects to carry out the suggestions.
- The employee who tries to be innovative hears the boss yell, "Why can't you follow instructions like everybody else?"
- The employee who comes early and stays late is called an "eager beaver" by colleagues; students who perform well in class are called "egg heads" or "teacher's pet" by their classmates, and sometimes, by other teachers.
- The employee cleaning up her work area is told by the boss that she is finally doing work that fits her personal qualifications.
- An employee is told, "You did such a good job on that report I'm going to let you do all of them from now on."
- Time is wasted at meetings sitting around waiting for latecomers.
- "No good deed goes unpunished." While this is technically not an example, it reflects the attitude among employees in many organizations that appropriate behavior frequently is punished.

Based on these examples, the conclusion can be drawn that people will fail to do some things just to avoid punishment. If punishment continues in these situations, employees will avoid doing what management wants of them. Punishment must be replaced with what employees perceive as rewards.

No Negative Consequence for Poor Performance

Supervisors many times do not ask certain employees to submit reports because the employees refuse to write reports, complete them late, or poorly. When an employee complains and protests why she is given a special project, some supervisors avoid giving that
employee special projects in the future because it is not worth the hassle. Some supervisors initiate disciplinary action with an employee who refuses to perform only to get pressure from higher management, the personnel department, or the union representative suggesting that the supervisor is being hard-nosed, thus forcing the supervisor to back off. Other supervisors feel that affirmative action requirements keep them from doing anything to poor performing minorities, females, 45 year-olds and over, and other "protected" groups. Some supervisors give above average performance appraisal ratings to below average workers because they refuse to be the one to put a black mark in employees' records. These examples depict workers who are not performing because there are no negative consequences to them for poor performance. Employees believe, and rightfully so, that their performance does not really matter or affect their lives.

These deplorable situations require that supervisors provide negative consequences for poor performance. Some things that could be done include:

- when an employee working on a project willfully performs badly, assign a less desirable work location;
- when employees willfully perform badly and do not improve their performance, consider demotion as one of the steps in a progressive discipline system;
- when an employee is demoted because of poor performance, reduce the salary;
- when an employee performs badly, deny or delay raises until performance improves;
- when it seems clear that a person is willfully not improving performance and coaching fails, terminate the employee.

The suggestion here is not to continually threaten and punish employees since that is what poor managers do. People tend to make quantitative changes in their behaviors, doing more intently what fails to work, instead of making qualitative changes and trying something different. So, when management's best positive efforts prove insufficient, there must be negative consequences to the employee for continued nonperformance, not just more reinforcement or failure to act.

In Conclusion

Although management in the past has relied on quick fixes, the need for long term behavior management techniques as embodied in the Law of Effect are sorely needed. Utilizing this deceptively simple principle, education managers and supervisors can better understand why employees do not perform as expected and take concrete, corrective actions. This can be accomplished without periodically vacillating between the hill of one guru or another.

References


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